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Abstract

The thirst for vengeance is a timeless subject in popular entertainment. One need only think of Old Testament scripture; Shakespeare's Hamlet; Quentin Tarantino's Kill Bill or the TV series Revenge, and we immediately conjure up images of a protagonist striving to seek justice to avenge a heinous wrong committed against them. These texts, and others like it, speak to that which is ingrained in our human spirit about not only holding others responsible for their actions, but also about retaliation as payback. This article seeks to problematise the way the popular revenge narrative effectively constructs the vendetta as a guilty pleasure through which the audience can vicariously gain satisfaction, while at the same time perpetuates law's rhetoric that personal desires for vengeance are to be repressed and denied. In particular, the article will demonstrate the way such popular revenge narratives contribute to the pathologising of human desire for payback.

Keywords

tv, effect, revengendas, pathologising, bitter, payback, taste

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The bitter taste of payback: the pathologising effect of TV ‘revengendas’

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The thirst for vengeance is a timeless subject in popular entertainment. One need only think of Old Testament scripture; Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*; Quentin Tarantino’s *Kill Bill* or the TV series *Revenge*, and we immediately conjure up images of a protagonist striving to seek justice to avenge a heinous wrong committed against them. These texts, and others like it, speak to that which is ingrained in our human spirit about not only holding others responsible for their actions, but also about retaliation as payback. This article seeks to problematise the way the popular revenge narrative effectively constructs the vendetta as a *guilty pleasure* through which the audience can vicariously gain satisfaction, while at the same time perpetuates law’s rhetoric that personal desires for vengeance are to be repressed and denied. In particular, the article will demonstrate the way such popular revenge narratives contribute to the pathologising of human desire for payback.

Can you taste revenge?

Amanda looks out at the water and sees a carving in the porch ledge. She recognises it as the double infinity symbol that is mirrored by the tattoo on her wrist, and she flashes back to when she and her father used to play together on the beach. Together they had kicked at the waves in the ocean and played in the sand, drawing the interlocking double infinity symbol into the beach. Her father had told her of his infinite love for her, and in those moments she experienced true contentment. Yet, that was soon to change, when one night after another idyllic day together, Amanda (at age 9) experienced a horrendous kind of personal tragedy. Without warning the FBI stormed into their beach-front home and arrested her father on grounds of terrorism. Despite his protestations of innocence and her screams of utter terror, her family is torn in two as they are forcibly separated. With her father sent to prison for a crime he did not commit, Amanda is institutionalised, forced into believing the lies about her father, and abandoned to the foster system. Her father is murdered in prison, she is abused in foster care, and eventually she is falsely accused of arson, leading to her own incarceration. It is not until her release from juvenile detention at 18 years old, that Amanda is finally made aware of her father’s innocence. She is given a gift – a box with the double infinity symbol engraved into it, containing letters and diaries from her father, which not only proves his innocence but also unmasks those responsible. Enraged about the loss she has suffered at the hands of wealthy socialites who are seemingly ‘getting away with it’, Amanda decides to avenge her father – to make the

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perpetrators pay for their actions in ways that the law has been unable to effect. One by one, Amanda crosses them off her list, working towards the ultimate payback ... and so the cycle of revenge begins.

This vignette of vengeance is the defining context for the contemporary television series *Revenge*,¹ and is extremely palatable to us. This, and many other similar stories (whether real or imagined) contribute to an emotional economy that says perpetrators of hard crime need to pay. We draw on our own experiences of being hurt, whether physically, emotionally or psychologically, and immediately we can recognise in ourselves a similar urge to retaliate. There is something atavistic about this desire for payback, that we quickly recognise its familiar conventions, such that the success of revenge narratives should be unsurprising. Popular cultural texts have spun this familiar revenge yarn into compelling action and drama, over hundreds of years, even extending back to biblical scripture,² with key storytelling elements such as conflict, pain, jealousy, and vengeance easily conjuring images of a protagonist fighting to avenge a heinous wrong committed against them, and/or their loved ones.³ The thirst for vengeance seems to be mutable across time and discourse, primarily because the concept of revenge speaks to that which is ingrained in our human spirit about not only holding others responsible for their actions, but also about retaliation as payback. The 'desire for revenge is an evolved outgrowth of our human sense of unsatisfied reciprocity',⁴ and this is reflected in the popular imagination, which seems to have an insatiable desire to follow and applaud the archetypal character pursuing a personal brand of vengeful justice. There is something deliciously voyeuristic about following the journey of the central character as they exact their revenge. We want them to succeed in their extra-legal vendetta and for that payback to be glorious, and the typical revenge narrative provides us with that satisfaction. As a 'ready made source of archetypes, plots and scenarios [that] ... implies certain expectations, tropes and pre-occupations',⁵ the revenge narrative is consistently appealing and relatable to audiences.

In this article, I explore the familiar desire for payback through the contemporary representation of revenge as 'justice', using the character of Emily Thorne in *Revenge*. Often described as a contemporary reimagining of Alexandre Dumas' timeless revenge masterpiece *The Count of Monte Cristo*,⁶ the television series *Revenge* (having just aired its 4th and final season) is replete with key Monte Cristo elements: the central protagonist as revenge seeker (Edmond Dante, Emily Thorne); the unlimited new found wealth; the reinvention of the protagonist in order to insinuate

¹*Revenge* (ABC productions, 2011–2015).

²For an example of biblical revenge see the story of Samson in the Old Testament: *Judges 13–16*.

³Indeed, the revenge quest of Emily as described in the vignette, is reminiscent of several intelligent and quick-witted protagonists on the small screen who experienced significant personal tragedy at the hands of others. For example, the characters of Veronica Mars (*Veronica Mars*, UPN/CW, 2004–2007), Patrick Jayne (*The Mentalist*, CBS, 2008–2015) and Oliver Queen (*Arrow*, CW 2012–present), have each been enormously popular because they displayed a shrewd intellect, sharp tongue and a retributive way of approaching matters, motivated by the vengeful desires that haunt them.

⁴Bloom (2001), p 61.

⁵Worcester (2012), p 334.

⁶Alexandre Dumas (1844). For examples of reviews that compare the two texts see: D'Amico (2012); Schadler (2014); Stanley (2011).

themselves in the world of the enemy; and importantly the deployment of a calculated and lengthy plan of revenge where the punishment fits the crime. Both are tales that contain an intoxicating mix of betrayal, intrigue and vengeance. As was the case in Edmond Dantes' nineteenth-century France, the familiar thirst for revenge is easily relatable in Emily Thorne's twenty-first-century American Hamptons. With Emily targeting and conquering a different enemy every week to the tune of her wisdom narratives, it appears that revenge lust remains an attractive element to audiences 170 years on from the vengeance filled time of Edmond Dantes.⁷ As such, the series of *Revenge* provokes a number of juridical questions: What role should vengeance play within our criminal justice system? What is the impact on legal consciousness of a weekly serial depicting vengeful takedowns and destructive payback as an alternate pathway from officially sanctioned legal mechanisms? Why is the desire for revenge represented as a visceral appeal to the darker elements of our human nature?

This article will explore such questions by problematising the way the popular revenge narrative effectively constructs the vendetta as a *guilty pleasure* through which the audience can vicariously gain satisfaction, while at the same time perpetuating law's rhetoric that personal desires for vengeance are to be repressed and denied. In particular, it argues that the consistent Hollywood apposition of retribution and revenge as divergent forms of 'justice', belies a conspiracy with law to pathologise the human desire for payback. The first section of the article will thus situate the formulaic elements of revenge as sitting outside the framework of a contemporary criminal justice system, and illustrate the casting of revenge as both, law's other and an opportunity for vicarious satisfaction. The second section will analyse Emily Thorne as the visual embodiment of payback in *Revenge* and argue that although the series illuminates the impossibility of seeking justice and closure in the act of revenge, we nevertheless connect with her desire for vengeance. The third section of the article will then illustrate the subtle conspiracy of law and popular culture to pathologise revenge in an attempt to maintain social order and boundaries, and briefly discuss the bitter taste of payback and the possible effects of its pathology.

Revenge as law's other

Revenge is a kind of wild justice, which the more a man's nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out.⁸

Although the thrill of revenge is something we might appreciate, most of us are aware that the law does not allow it to constitute a justification for criminal activity. 'Officially, revenge is a bad thing,'⁹ and so, within the criminal justice systems of most western societies, a clear distinction is made between justice and vengeance, or retribution and revenge. On the one hand, legally sanctioned retribution is a sign of refinement, while on the other hand, revenge is seen as a barbaric and primitive form of

⁷In contemporary society, the interest and popularity in Emily Thorne's quest for revenge becomes all the more understandable when considered within a context where there is enormous resentment for the wealthy among us who seem to be able to 'buy' justice in this particularly catastrophic economy. See for example the review of Stanley (2011), which elaborates on this.

⁸Bacon (1625), p 15.

⁹Miller (1998), p 70.

punishment that should be kept external to an emotionally detached and dispassionate law.¹⁰ It is consistently argued within political and legal philosophy that the retribution offered by the criminal law has its foundation in reason without passion, with a strong focus on procedure and due process, and is to be clearly distinguished from revenge – a form of vengeance that concedes to passion, anger, and hatred.¹¹

This exclusion of revenge from the public life of ‘justice’ underlies retributive theory, which is in essence, the foremost justification for punishment in western legal systems,¹² and ‘gives the entire criminal process, from criminalisation to adjudication to punishment, a coherence’.¹³ The retributive presupposition is that human beings are morally responsible, and so as a deontological theory, retributivism is a retrospective justification that links justice with dessert, whereby offenders deserve to be punished in proportion to the severity of the offending conduct. A wrongdoer deserves punishment because – and only to the extent that – he or she has done wrong. Retributive theory argues that it is the state’s right and duty to punish the offender by virtue of their culpability for the offence,¹⁴ and crucially, to effect this punishment with emotional detachment, reasoned objectivity and controlled proportionality. In contrast, vengeance is characterised as ‘uncontrolled, subjective, individual, admitting no reason’,¹⁵ and bound by no rules, and is to be excluded from retributive justice.

While retribution and revenge both share a common demand (‘just desserts’ as a response to wrong-doing), it is the unmitigated, chaotic and vengeful commission of revenge that is denied within the criminal justice system. Vengeance is ultimately a self-serving and retaliatory measure with a focus on getting even, which is reflected in the very definition of the word ‘revenge’, as it calls attention to the reciprocal harm inherent in the ‘act of doing harm to another *in return* for a wrong or injury’ and in the ‘desire to *repay* injuries by inflicting hurt in return’.¹⁶ In contrast, retributive punishment seeks to curtail the escalating reciprocity by promising to provide a measured response to harms and wrongdoing. It is the theoretical justification for retribution as objective, measured and dispassionate that operates to polarise revenge as law’s crazed ‘other’. In this way, revenge is seen as ‘anathema to the rule of law’,¹⁷ and it is this juxtaposition that Nozick articulates in *Philosophical Explanations*.¹⁸ In Nozick’s identification of several key ways in which revenge can be distinguished from retribution,¹⁹ it would appear that two connected distinctions

¹⁰Rosenbaum (2013).

¹¹Sarat (2005), p 279. See also Connelly (2007) and Culbert (2005).

¹²Garvey (2003), p 303; Braithwaite (2003), p 389.

¹³Tuomala (1993), p 229.

¹⁴This evokes a Kantian philosophy: ‘He must first be found to be deserving of punishment before any consideration is given to the utility of this punishment for himself or for his fellow citizens’ (Kant 1965).

¹⁵Miller (1998), p 73.

¹⁶Online Oxford English Dictionary. ‘Revenge’, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/revenge>.

¹⁷Miller (1998), p 73.

¹⁸Nozick (1981). Interestingly, Miller suggests that this explanation of revenge by Nozick ‘turns revenge by definitional fiat into a pathology’ and is ‘representative of the general anti-revenge tradition of political, moral, and legal philosophy’: Miller (2000), p 163. The inspiration for the major argument of this article in relation to the pathologising of revenge, was due in part, to this thread in Miller’s work.

¹⁹Nozick (1981), p 366–367.

emerge: (i) revenge is personal, while retribution need not be; and (ii) revenge involves a significant emotional register that does not equally command the attention of retribution. As will be demonstrated below, it is the combination of these distinctions that are not only manifested in the character of Emily Thorne, but also contribute to the pathology of revenge. But first, let us briefly consider these distinctions in turn.

(i) Revenge is personal

Vengeance is viewed as an intensely private act of vindication. It is a punitive action motivated by a strong sense of personal injustice. As such the subjective, private nature of revenge is contrasted strongly with the impersonal nature of retribution where its agent 'need have no special or personal tie to the victim of the wrong for which he exacts retribution'.²⁰ This has two key implications. First, revenge can only be desired *and* inflicted by someone with a personal tie, whereas retribution can be inflicted and desired by people without that connection at all;²¹ and second, revenge is not limited in the amount of the punishment that can be inflicted (it is determined according to the intensity of the personal injustice),²² whereas retribution is limited by the levels determined by the state and, guided by considerations of proportionality, fairness, and equality.

(ii) Revenge is emotional

Unlike retribution, revenge is intensely emotional. It 'represents an unwarranted concession to an anger and passion that knows no limits'.²³ Retribution, on the other hand, with all its objective impersonality, need involve no emotional tone whatsoever.²⁴ Of course, as Miller points out, it is not that retribution is completely lacking in emotion, for 'what do we suppose retribution without the accompaniment of emotions, such as a sense of duty, indignation, disapproval, or outrage, would look like?'²⁵ It is more then, about the *type* of emotion. While retribution would deny and suppress certain passions such as rage, shame, hatred, frustration and despair, it is precisely these sentiments that motivate and galvanise the revenge quest. Naturally, this passionate pursuit of justice through vengeance is inextricably tied to the personal nature of revenge described above, because the strong and defining personal tone of the revenge act predicates a certain expectation of *Schadenfreude*. This derivation of pleasure and satisfaction in the suffering of the wrongdoer is often manifested in the revenge seeker needing to personally witness (and feel the joy/satisfaction in) the infliction of pain and suffering on the wrong-doer, and for them to be assured that the wrong-doer is fully cognisant of the personal motivations behind the revenge-seeker's activity. Because revenge focuses on personal pain and suffering, and typically

²⁰Nozick (1981), p 367.

²¹Nozick (1981), p 367.

²²'Revenge by nature need set no limits, although the revenger may limit what he inflicts for external reasons.' Nozick (1981), p 367.

²³Sarat (2005), p 279.

²⁴Nozick (1981), p 367.

²⁵'Unemotional bureaucratic implementation of punishment looks much like law according to Kafka: Miller (1998), p 74; see also Miller (2000), p 164.

involves destructive emotions such as anger, hatred, bitterness, and resentment, the resulting vengeful action is about violently forcing the wrong-doer to recognise, and expiate, their culpability.

By distinguishing between revenge and retribution in the ways described above, one of the key activities of the criminal justice system is to effectively curtail personal vengeance, and channel the inherently human instinct for revenge into a more palatable, measured administration of retributive justice within the bounds of the law. It's not that revenge has disappeared over the course of legal history, but rather it is something Miller argues is 'continually overcome by acts of will, conscious political commitment, and wise social planning'.²⁶ Oldenquist calls this 'sanitized revenge'²⁷ and Posner argues that the essence of revenge that underlies retributive theory is but a tamed reconstruction: 'most of criminal law ... can be viewed as a civilized substitute for what would otherwise be the irrepressible impulse to avenge wrongful injuries'.²⁸ Contemporary legality's demand for 'just desserts' masquerades the traditionally unpalatable foundations of revenge within the guise of retributive punishment. Law, in an attempt to institute a justice of rationality, seeks to 'weed out revenge and silence vengeance'.²⁹ In so doing, it has the effect of repressing any vengeful desire, devaluing the rage and anger associated with revenge, and frustrating its purpose. While to some, revenge as 'justice' remains a persistent ideal, bubbling away 'just below the surface of criminal punishment',³⁰ the effect of criminal law's retributive focus is to cast revenge as a stain on modern legality, as law's distasteful other, and convert it to a pathology – an emotional impulse that should be discouraged, tamed and ultimately denied by the retributive function of the law. This understanding of revenge, as being personal, emotional, and a natural urge denied by law, is a theme that enlivens popular culture, and contributes to the experience of viewing Emily's extra-legal vendetta as a 'guilty pleasure'.

Vicarious Vengeance – the 'guilty pleasure' of 'Revenge' viewing

We live in an era where the public is extremely active in the process of consuming stories of popular culture as one stimulant to the production, transformation and perpetuation of meaning and desire in relation to law and justice.³¹ As part of this active consumption, viewers thus utilise popular entertainment as tools of empowerment – to 'gain knowledge and understanding of themselves and others and the world in which we live',³² and to own up to 'vulnerabilities that they avoid admitting in everyday life'.³³ Watching the revenge narrative in contemporary media entertainment is no exception, with audiences able to experience a sense of vicarious catharsis in 'bad

²⁶ Miller (2000), p 161.

²⁷ Oldenquist (2004), p 340.

²⁸ Posner (1988), p 25–26.

²⁹ Sarat (2005), p 279.

³⁰ Sarat (1997), p 169.

³¹ Sherwin has demonstrated the 'highly porous' nature of the boundaries between law, culture and images and I have consistently argued that popular stories help individuals to frame and contextualise normative expectations of the legal system: Sherwin (2014), p xxxv; Sharp (2011), pp 33–51; Sharp (2005), p 233.

³² Tager and Matthee (2014), p 24.

³³ Bartsch (2012), p 294.

guys' getting what they deserve.³⁴ In particular, many texts effectively utilise the law's denial of vengeance in the portrayal of a protagonist who must resort to passionately, secretly and illegally enacting their revenge as the only available mode of justice in the face of that impotent law. Such recurring themes in the popular revenge narrative question the status, authority and legitimacy of the law; interrogate law's (in)ability to achieve justice; and subsequently suggest the circumstances in which 'acting outside of the law might be considered' necessary and acceptable.³⁵ As Susan Jacoby argued, a 'society that is unable to convince individuals of its ability to exact atonement for injury is a society that runs a constant risk of having its members revert to the wilder forms of justice'.³⁶ Our world is increasingly providing circumstances and contexts where individuals are left crying out for justice, and desperately want to see offenders getting what they deserve.³⁷ Observing the protagonists of popular entertainment seeking to violently secure their own brand of justice in the absence of effective law, can provide a vicarious release of desire for 'wild justice'³⁸ that is not possible in other 'real life' forums.³⁹

Certainly, during its four seasons on the air, *Revenge* consistently provided explicit and elaborate visions of Emily exacting this 'wild justice', and audiences not only loved it, but they understood it.⁴⁰ By being able to identify with the personal and emotional aspects of Emily's quest for vengeance, viewers continued to be invested in her 'revengenda', and tuned in weekly to see who would become the latest focus of her wrath. In this way, the contemporary revenge narrative, as embodied in the character of Emily Thorne, unwittingly but inevitably conspires with law to subvert and silence the natural desires one might experience as a result of significant loss. It is this conspiracy of law and popular culture to portray a dualism of legitimate retributive justice on one hand, and illegitimate revenge on the other that works to pathologise the human desire for payback. This is what can be explored through the narrative devices used to portray Emily's personal and emotional vengeance in the series of *Revenge*.

[E]ntertainment research has accumulated an impressive body of evidence supporting the assumption that affective experiences can be gratifying for media users, including both the immediate gratification derived from rewarding feelings, and the more indirect but not less significant role of affect in the gratification of social and cognitive needs. (Bartsch (2012), p 273)

³⁴Tager and Matthee (2014), p 25.

³⁵Worcester (2012), p 334.

³⁶Jacoby (1983), p 10.

³⁷See further some empirical research that highlights this public desire: Sharp (2014); Sharp (2015).

³⁸Berkowitz argues that 'revenge has been neutered' and is no longer seen as 'wild justice' or 'law's other' in the 'mild fare of Hollywood blockbusters' (Berkowitz (2005), p 280) however this supports my thesis that the contemporary revenge story in pop culture cultivates revenge as a pathology by presenting vengeance as palatable and desirable, yet ultimately producing destructive consequences. See further discussion in the section titled *Revenge as Pathology* in this article.

³⁹One online reviewer of *Revenge* commented: 'We are invested in seeing if she gets [her revenge]', and 'I'll admit, I enjoy seeing the Graysons' squirming': Martina Boone (2011).

⁴⁰See for example this comment from a viewer: 'I understand that Emily is not entirely innocent but the Grayson's murdered her father as well as a plane load of people. I think that gives her plenty of leeway to do whatever she wants': Public comment by Mysterv on Jan 13, 2014 in response to Thomas, (2014).

Emily's wisdom of revenge

For the innocent the past may hold a reward but for the treacherous it's only a matter of time before the past delivers what they truly deserve. Emily Thorne, Series 1, Episode 3, *Betrayal*

In *Revenge*, Emily Thorne (played by Emily Van Camp) is the newest resident of The Hamptons – a playground for the rich and powerful in which the prominent Grayson family maintain social control. When Emily was young (and known as Amanda Clarke) her father, David Clarke, was framed by the Graysons for terrorist activity and subsequently sent to prison. While serving his time, the Graysons conspired to have David murdered in order to prevent the truth from coming out. After serving a number of years herself in a juvenile detention centre, Emily discovers (through reading her father's diaries), that in fact, he was an innocent man, and that she now has access to a sizeable fortune invested on her behalf. Jaded by the fact that the official justice system did nothing to uncover the truth about her father's innocence, and knowing that the Graysons remain unpunished, Emily embarks on a quest for revenge that involves years of planning, martial arts instruction, and training in the art of corporate espionage and deception. She then returns to the Hamptons with a new identity, and her constant vow is to exact her excruciatingly drawn out revenge on the Graysons and anyone else connected with the loss, betrayal and heartache she has experienced. By constituting herself as an agent of violence and retaliation, disregarding the system of law that has failed her, Emily's actions clearly indicate that central to her ideology of justice is the importance of ultimate payback.

This weekly portrayal of Emily's 'revengenda' in motion, captures the public imagination because viewers can resonate emotionally with her desire to hold the perpetrators responsible for their actions, and therefore legitimate her claim as the avenger. 'The avenger status carries with it right and legitimacy, and thus we confer it on those whose claims are deserving.'⁴¹ The audience is constantly reminded that Emily's claims are captivating and deserving through two powerful narrative devices that illustrate what she has lost, and what motivates her. First, by the flashback memories to the wonderful father-daughter relationship that was ripped from her; and second, by the first person voice over narration which bookends every episode, and effectively positions the audience to align with her extra-legal cause. It is through each of these devices that the viewer gets a real understanding that Emily Thorne views revenge as both intensely personal and emotionally charged.

The flashbacks: it's personal

Justice, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. Some see an innocent victim, others see evil incarnate getting exactly what's deserved.

Emily Thorne, Series 1, Episode 18, *Justice*

Over the four seasons of *Revenge*, it is clear through numerous flashbacks that Emily's childhood was extremely traumatic as a result of the insidious actions of the Grayson family. It begins at 8 years old, with the distressing physical displacement from her father as he is arrested for financing a terrorist attack on the United States, and her

⁴¹Miller (1998), p 81; Miller (2000), p 172.

institutionalisation at the hands of a psychiatrist bribed by the Graysons to ensure the familial separation. Her psychological, physical and emotional traumatisation continues as she is released into foster care, where she is abused by her foster mother, and framed for arson of the foster care home. It is this false charge that sees Emily spend the rest of her youth in maximum security juvenile detention, and it is only upon her release at age 18, that Emily discovers her father's innocence and the role of the Graysons in the destruction of her once idyllic family life.

It is not surprising that such emotional abuse would have contributed to significant intangible losses in Emily's life – the loss of loved ones; the loss of her childhood and her dignity; and significantly, the loss of what could have been. This extensive maltreatment over time would have undoubtedly engendered in Emily the primitive urge for payback. 'What revenge offers in response to trauma and loss is the fantasy of control.'⁴² Indeed, researchers have established that experiences of prolonged childhood trauma can contribute to a strong desire for revenge as a method for regaining control and dignity.⁴³ The 'connection between unresolved bereavement ... and the resolution through some kind of revenge goes back to human social evolutionary history',⁴⁴ and we naturally recognise Emily's desire for vengeance as a very understandable and correspondingly empowering response to trauma.

As Marongiu and Newman have argued, 'all acts of vengeance arise from an elementary sense of injustice, a primitive feeling that one has been arbitrarily subjected to a tyrannical power against which one is powerless to act'.⁴⁵ Researchers have demonstrated that the 'abuse of power on the part of the perpetrator and the helplessness experienced by the victim are hallmark characteristics of interpersonal violence and, therefore, we can expect that a victim will be highly motivated to seek revenge'.⁴⁶ The actions of the Graysons in Emily's complete demise over her formative years, would certainly fit this description of destabilising interpersonal violence, and we are regularly reminded of this throughout the *Revenge* series. The flashback scenes of Emily as a young girl being forcibly wrenched from her loving father is heartbreakingly repeated on many occasions throughout the series. There is no mistaking that the purpose of turning the camera gaze to these moments in Emily's life is for the audience to understand, justify and applaud her turn to vengeance. This is evident in the comments from a viewer: 'The flashbacks to Amanda Clark are what make me like Emily. I feel for her and understand why she wants revenge so badly.'⁴⁷ The tyrannical power of a corporate oligarchy spear-headed by the Graysons is meant to starkly contrast with the innocence, vulnerability and mistreatment of young Emily. The regular visual representation of the demolition of her perfect life as Amanda Clark, positions viewers to become convinced with Emily that revenge is not simply an option, but a necessary response – the only response that will act as mollification to the anger and rage that burns away inside her:

⁴²Berkowitz and Cornell (2005), p 316.

⁴³See for example the work cited in Bloom (2001).

⁴⁴Bloom (2001), p 78. See also Eisenstat (2005).

⁴⁵Marongiu and Newman (1987), p 9.

⁴⁶Bloom (2001), 80.

⁴⁷Public comment by Ghenet Myrthil in response to Boone (2011).

When I was a little girl, my understanding of revenge was as simple as the Sunday school proverbs it hid behind. Neat, little morality slogans like, ‘Do unto others’ and ‘Two wrongs don’t make a right.’ But ... For the truly wronged, real satisfaction can only be found in one of two places – absolute forgiveness or mortal vindication. This is not a story about forgiveness ... (Emily Thorne, Series 1, Episode 1, *Pilot*)

That viewers will understand, appreciate and support this vengeful motivation of Emily is further made manifest in the knowledge that Emily has zero expectation that the justice system would administer to the Graysons what they deserve for their violence upon her – for stealing her childhood, her dignity and her family. To Emily, the officially sanctioned justice of the legal system has been ineffectual, spineless and ultimately absent. ‘When justice is not forthcoming from a higher authority, people will and do take justice into their own hands. Acts of vengeance are the result.’⁴⁸ Revenge in the form of destructive payback is the only justice she becomes concerned with, so she literally takes on the mantle of the ‘girl next door’ in order to bring her ‘Revendenda’ to fruition. Each episode of the series brings Emily one step closer to making the Graysons pay for what they have done, and her desire for revenge is so strong that it overrides any other need to obey the law, or to respect the official justice system. To her, revenge is inextricably linked to a personal, subjective ideal of justice, which she views as completely divergent from the ‘justice’ purported to be provided by the law. To her, the Graysons (and other associated perpetrators) must pay. As the law has not actually effected justice in the sense of ‘payback’, then she must provide it herself. As she narrates in one episode:

Clarence Darrow, one of history’s greatest lawyers, once noted, ‘There is no such thing as justice, in or out of court.’ Perhaps because justice is a flawed concept that ultimately comes down to the decision of twelve people. People with their own experiences, prejudices. Feelings about what defines right and wrong. Which is why, when the system fails us, we must go out and seek our own justice. (Emily Thorne, Series 1, Episode 18, *Justice*)

Emily’s character exists as the ‘visual metaphor for an extra-legal fury’ that cannot be recognised by law.⁴⁹ She represents a vengeful worldview that values ‘emotion over reason’ and ‘unchecked anger over due process’.⁵⁰ As Emily embodies the legal ‘outsider’ enacting her form of revenge via methods not only external to the law and the official justice system, but in defiance of them, she demonstrates that while revenge, anger, and emotion matter, they are forced to exist as something set apart from the law.

Emily as the revenge seeker is defined by a personal and passionate desire to enact retaliation as payback and this resonates most strongly with an audience coming to terms with their own justice desires. I have argued elsewhere that the public imagination is consumed by an intuitive desire for punishment as the only form of acceptable justice in response to crime.⁵¹ This manifests itself in the public expectation that it is only when the guilty are *actually* punished that justice is seen to be done, and in the

⁴⁸Bloom (2001), 80.

⁴⁹Worcester (2012), p 332.

⁵⁰Worcester (2012), p 329.

⁵¹Sharp (2014).

Kantian-like understanding that punishment equates with justice.⁵² Correspondingly, by believing the promise of law to be the provision of justice through effective punishment, the public imagination is quick to find that too often the law in fact does not deliver it.⁵³ Furthermore, research has also demonstrated that the vicarious experience of effecting justice in fictional entertainment may serve ‘to strengthen individuals’ belief in a just world’.⁵⁴ Thus, despite the anti-revenge discourse that permeates law’s articulation of justice, ‘we still feel at some visceral level that the world of honor and revenge is nobler than ours, and it still remains for us grand and frightfully alluring’.⁵⁵ It is therefore, this instinctive human desire for payback as justice that is vividly and repeatedly symbolised in the visual narrative that reminds us of what motivates Emily’s quest for revenge.⁵⁶ The consistent use of reminiscent flashbacks and voice-over narrations reinforces the perspective that her revenge is not only personally legitimate, but that it is also emotionally justified.

The voice-over narrations: it’s emotional

With the dominant emotional tone of righteous anger, Emily’s story of vengeance provides the audience with an opportunity to engage with an individual, contingent and passionate notion of punishment that potentially serves an innate revenge lust. The public imagination is put to work, stimulated by emotional stories of extreme trauma, abuse and tragedy that evoke an instinctive desire for payback. As a result, viewers can more easily forge an empathetic connection with Emily because of a sense of shared identification, where they imagine how it would feel if they had to endure such heartache, betrayal and loss. The first person voice-over narration of wisdom that envelops every episode is crucial to this orientation. Each instalment effectively positions the audience to align with her extra-legal cause, and in combination they form a wisdom of revenge that comprises Emily’s vengeful worldview with which audiences can connect. For example, in the Pilot episode, Emily narrates what becomes her refrain:

When deception cuts this deep someone has to pay. My father’s chance to bring justice to the truly guilty was stolen from him. His only option was to forgive. I have others ... My father died an innocent man, betrayed by the woman he loved. When everything you love has been stolen from you. Sometimes all you have left is revenge. (Emily Thorne, Series 1, Episode 1, *Pilot*)

The framing of revenge in this way as a necessary and natural response to the tragedy that has befallen her, invites the audience to recognise and appreciate the desire for vengeance. These voice-overs evoke a sympathetic viewer response to Emily’s acts of violent payback (even when confronted with extreme forms of violence) upon those who remain unpunished. This is effective framing because it draws on the

⁵²Research has shown that people often equate punishment with justice. Welsh et al, (2011), p 460.

⁵³Sharp (2014); See also Sharp (2011; 2014).

⁵⁴Bartsch (2012), p 271.

⁵⁵Miller (1998), p 72.

⁵⁶As one viewer stated: ‘I loved this episode ... Emily is most interesting when she is 100% revenge focused’: Public comment by QMargo on Jan 13, 2014 in response to: Thomas (2014).

emotions that are associated with personal tragedy and loss. ‘Vengeance and punishment for wrongdoings and their association with justice, are common narrative themes in television and film’⁵⁷ precisely because they tap into our individual emotive evaluation of what deserves punishment. In using familiar storytelling conventions that particularly focus on the victim’s encounters with crime, these popular stories depend on the viewer’s emotional identification with the victim to convert responses into a critique of law’s ability to achieve appropriate punishment goals. *Revenge* deploys these techniques successfully. Embodied in the reframing of her story each week is an emotional association with Emily Thorne the ‘victim’, as an effective method of garnering support for Emily Thorne the ‘revenge-seeker’. Although the dichotomy of her actions render her both villain and hero,⁵⁸ it is our emotional identification with her victimisation that gives her character credence and likeability. While granted, not all viewers will experience verisimilitude with Emily’s Hamptons’ lifestyle and her seemingly unlimited resources, the loss she has suffered (of her father and of her childhood) is universally relatable. As the actress Emily Van Camp has stated:

Revenge is a universal language. Everybody has thought about it at some point ... [Emily] lost everything and really has nothing left to lose ... A big concern of mine when I read the script initially was, how do you continue to make this character likable even though she’s doing these awful things? When you see the flashbacks of young [Emily/Amanda] and how much pain she had to endure, those are essential to the story ... There’s a glimpse of vulnerability.⁵⁹

It is this vulnerability that is vital to effecting Emily’s transition from ‘victim’ to justified ‘avenger’ in the minds of the audience. Moreover, emotion and vulnerability are the key to successful popular entertainment – that is, by placing emotion at the heart of the narrative, and by provoking empathy, respect and even admiration for the protagonist who might act outside the bounds of normal propriety or legality, popular media will successfully garner loyalty from its viewers.⁶⁰ This is most evident in one episode from Season 3 entitled ‘Endurance’⁶¹ where Emily seems more than ever ready to walk away from her revengenda completely. Physically and mentally broken after being shot in the stomach by Daniel Grayson, Emily finds herself utterly lost and despondent, questioning the revenge path on which she has travelled for so long, while the Graysons circle, eager to carry on their corrupted existence with impunity. Yet, in her vulnerability she is given a further blow – a revelation that her injuries have made her sterile – and this re-ignites the flame of vengeance within her. With the news that the Graysons have forcibly removed yet another good thing from her,⁶² Emily refocuses her resolve to carry out her revengenda, gathers the strength to endure, and gets back on track. In the voice-over narration for this episode, the audience hears Emily’s resolve:

⁵⁷Welsh et al, (2011), p 460.

⁵⁸Tager and Matthee (2014), p 21, use this description for the character of Dexter Morgan in the tv series *Dexter*. They argue that he is a character ‘who incorporates the emotionless, clinical actions of a psychopath into the day-to-day actions of a normal person’: p 21.

⁵⁹Keveney (2012).

⁶⁰Bartsch (2012), p 268.

⁶¹Episode 13, Season 3, first aired on ABC, 12 Jan, 2014.

⁶²In this episode, once she learns of her tragic loss, she says to Aiden: ‘I found out I can’t have children. They took my father, my mother, my best friend, and now this’. Emily Thorne, Series 3, Episode 13, *Endurance*.

When my father was in prison, he wrote in his journals about how the value of life can be directly measured by our will to endure. That we have a remarkable ability to resist fatigue, to withstand pain, to keep fighting, as long as we don't lose sight of what we're fighting for. (Emily Thorne, Series 3, Episode 13, *Endurance*)

What Emily is fighting for, is the passionate pursuit of justice through vengeance that is inextricably tied to a certain expectation of *Schadenfreude*. After this latest destructive act, Emily is renewed in her drive to gain pleasure from witnessing the Grayson's suffer, and it is this moment of vulnerability that is effectively put to work in the narrative to remind the audience that Emily is relatable, and that her desire for revenge is understandable. As one viewer stated in response to this rehabilitated vengeful vigour:

Now with this episode, Emily had finally been reminded as to why she is in the Hamptons – to get revenge damn it! And while I think the no children [storyline] is a fake ... if it fuels Emily's revenge fire against the Graysons and makes her start fighting again, that is actually very fine by me⁶³

The provocation of empathetic identification with Emily as revenge-seeker is pivotal to the believability of Emily's quest for vengeance in *Revenge*. In providing the flashback memories and voice-over narration, the series emotionally engages the viewer towards a referential 'reading' of Emily's actions as both justifiable and necessary.

That is, while viewers are cognitively aware that they are watching a fictional television series, they nevertheless become emotionally engaged with the revenge narrative and the character's motivations and values. In a referential reading, viewers use the narrative to connect popular fictions with real life, and so they will often relate to characters as if they are real people and in turn respond emotionally to them.⁶⁴ With Emily, the referential viewing is effected through the provision of inside information (flashback memories and revelatory inner thoughts) which position the audience to vicariously adopt her point of view and experience emotions from her perspective.⁶⁵ In particular, these devices allow for viewers to participate in a 'trying on of characters ... imagining how wonderful or awful it would be to be like them',⁶⁶ which further facilitates the vicarious rationalisation that Emily's vengeful response to the horrendous actions of the Graysons is not only understandable, but also justified. Such vicarious justification is evident in another comment from a fan in response to the 'Endurance' episode:

The Graysons are truly vile human beings. Conrad funded a terrorist group that was responsible for the deaths of hundreds of people. Hundreds. They framed an innocent man for the crime and Conrad later had him killed. They are responsible for the deaths of Declan, Amanda ... shall I go on ... they deserve every single thing Emily has done to them, and 10 times more. That's why I'll never see Emily as a villain. Maybe it's personal for Emily, but let's not forget that have ruined many lives, and those people deserve justice too.⁶⁷

⁶³Public comment by QMargo on Jan 13, 2014 in response to Thomas (2014).

⁶⁴Liebes and Katz (1993), p 100.

⁶⁵Bartsch (2012), p 272.

⁶⁶Liebes and Katz (1993), p 103.

⁶⁷Public comment by Run4Nova on Jan 13, 2014 in response to Thomas (2014).

Being privy to her internal motivations each week via these flashbacks and miniature soliloquies, means that viewers are armed with crucial inside information to emotionally support her actions.⁶⁸ These plot and production devices effectively invite the viewer to engage with the revenge narrative – they provide valuable personal insight into the various themes that connect revenge: dissatisfaction with law, abuse of authority, guilt and betrayal, and in this way, *Revenge* subtly positions the viewer to emotionally identify with Emily as the victim, and appreciate her need to fulfil her vengeance quest. Precisely because villains have seemingly ‘gotten away with’ their destructive activities, Emily represents the frustrations of those of us who might vicariously ‘fantasize about striking back at enemies, whether they be real or imagined’.⁶⁹

And yet, our positioning of natural alignment with Emily’s desire for vengeance is also constructed by the narrative as a deviation from that which is within the bounds of socially accepted behaviour, and is therefore reconstituted as pathology. By juxtaposing the radical and emotional revenge seeker against the dispassionate, controlled legal system, the television series fuels law’s construction of revenge as law’s ‘other’ and convinces us that vengeful desires should be repressed. The lasting impression is that we can vicariously view and appreciate the desire for revenge, but we should never enact it ourselves, lest we descend into destruction.

Revenge as pathology

In every life there comes a day of reckoning, a time when unsettled scores demand their retribution, and our own lies and transgressions are finally laid bare. (Emily Thorne, Series 1, Episode 22, *Reckoning*)

When we empathise with the characters like Emily Thorne, as they skirt the periphery of law to enact diverse modes of revenge as ‘justice’, we implicitly acquiesce to the way revenge is constructed as law’s self-serving other – and as a consequence we ‘make strange’⁷⁰ and abnormal our own natural desire to see wrong-doers pay for their actions. The popular text achieves this by instructing us how to ‘see’ law, as the only legitimate form of retribution. While the text invokes empathic alignment with a natural revenge lust, it simultaneously reminds us that ‘law’ is the only appropriate mechanism for retaliatory action. This is the power of the visual popular cultural form – ‘to give substance and form to everyday discourses’⁷¹ and to piece together the social picture of law that is ‘real’. As a television series, *Revenge* effectively achieves this by drawing the viewer in to the emotional impulse of revenge, while all the while reinforcing long-standing cultural and juridical assumptions that ‘justice’ will only accommodate vengeful desires if they align with the more controlled and proportionate retribution offered by the ‘law’. Guided by the ‘same large principles of culpability

⁶⁸Tager and Matthee (2014), deploy this argument in relation to Dexter’s voice-overs in the TV series *Dexter*: p 21.

⁶⁹Worcester (2012), p 329.

⁷⁰Tim Peters identifies the use of estrangement as a mode of cultural legal studies – such that ‘making strange’ traditional concepts and meaning about law, is another form of cultural legal studies reading: Peters (2015).

⁷¹Kelly (2014), p 405.

and liability that inform the law itself', revenge recognises that law has been 'captured by procedural innovations that put the law at the service of injustice'.⁷²

In the depiction of Emily's suffering and subsequent path to exacting vengeance, *Revenge* continues to circulate and valorise the assumption that law is dispassionate, ordered, rational and objective in contrast with the destructive, chaotic and wildly disproportionate act of vengeance. This is an example of what Kelly argues produces 'taken-for-granted assumptions that take on the appearance of being innate, unchanging, and necessary structures of social existence',⁷³ and has the consequence of equipping the viewer with 'dominant cultural logics' which appear to be common sense responses.⁷⁴ In this way, it is argued that the *Revenge* series elicits audience consent to the justification of contemporary retributive justice while pathologising vengeful desires, because it appeals to a common-sense assumption that revenge lust, while attractive and understandable, is ultimately destructive and unstable, and better left to the authority of the state. The success of *Revenge* in producing this pathology is therefore connected with the way in which the contaminating effect of vengeance is depicted.

The bitter taste of payback

Revenge, at first though sweet/Bitter ere long back on itself recoils⁷⁵

We have seen that while law attempts to repress revenge, or invisibilise its more violent urgings, some texts of popular culture seem to bring those urgings out into the light, to recognise the innate desires we have for payback, especially when the law has not provided it. Yet, these texts also reflect the temporary nature of satisfaction that can be garnered from vengeance activity, the cyclical effects of violent retaliation, and the 'reality' of the harms associated with revenge. It is this then that provokes the bitter taste recognised by John Milton hundreds of years ago, and through which our revenge lust becomes pathologised.

Vengeance-based dramas like *Revenge* draws us into the world of payback because in our fantasy, revenge accords aesthetically with closure and satisfaction.⁷⁶ And yet, at the same time, we are shown that these goals at times remain forever unfulfilled. So, while we enjoy the 'guilty pleasure' of vicariously living out the fantasy of exacting revenge, we also recognise that acting on the revenge desire can have the unintended consequence of subsequent, compounding and tangential loss and heartache. Although Emily's single minded 'revengenda' was relatively contained at the start (where in each discrete episode only the intended victim got 'what was coming to them') as the series progresses, the cyclic and perpetual nature of revenge starts to become apparent in the escalating number of complications and the necessity of further violence to accomplish her plans. As such the series serves as a morality tale about the polluting effect of revenge – it contaminates and stains her friends, her community and even herself. Emily makes many personal sacrifices to pursue her

⁷²Miller (2000), p 201.

⁷³Kelley (2014), p 405.

⁷⁴Kelley (2014), p 405.

⁷⁵Milton, *Paradise Lost* (Kastan ed, 2005).

⁷⁶Miller (1998), p 83.

single-minded path to revenge, including bearing the burden of guilt for collateral damage and even giving up the possibility of securing her one true love.

Yet, Emily herself identifies that although this is the bitter taste of payback, she is nevertheless willing to endure these sacrifices in order to channel her wrath and enact her revenge:

In its purest form, an act of retribution provides symmetry, the rendering of payment for crimes against the innocent. But the danger of retaliation lies in furthering the cycle of violence. Still, it's a risk that must be met when the greater offence is to allow the guilty to go unpunished. (Emily Thorne, Series 2, Episode 15, *Retribution*)

Interestingly, psychologists have discovered much about revenge in the last decade, particularly regarding the diverse ways in which the quest for revenge often ends in unfulfilled expectations. Behavioural scientists have demonstrated that 'instead of quenching hostility, revenge can prolong the unpleasantness of the original offense' and 'instead of delivering justice, revenge often creates only a cycle of retaliation'.⁷⁷ This is clearly reflected in the series of *Revenge*. Emily becomes disorder incarnate in effecting the systematic destruction of socio-political Hamptons' hierarchy, and while the series cultivates empathy for revenge seekers on the one hand, it concomitantly perpetuates the association of personal vendettas with destruction, disorder and repetitive loss. The impact on the viewer is that while they may initially understand and relate to the motivations of the revenge seeker, over time they are subtly being reminded that in order to maintain social cohesion, the passion of revenge should be diluted, if not neutralised, in favour of the discipline of law's retributive measures. By juxtaposing the order of law on the one hand, and the chaos and disorder of Emily's revenge on the other, any natural right Emily (and the viewer) has to desire revenge, and act on that desire, is subsequently pathologised.

This subtle shift from supporting the main character's vengeful actions to identifying the corresponding destructive consequences, is what Posner described as one effect of revenge literature:

We the audience start off with great sympathy for the revenger and wish him or her complete success, only to find that as the play (or story) proceeds we cool on revenge. The vivid picture of the revenger's wrong with which we began fades and is replaced by an equally vivid picture of the horrors of the revenge itself.⁷⁸

Revenge seeking behaviour is thus seen as provoking disorder, criminality, social confusion, panic and guilt, and this is what ultimately produces not only the bitter taste of payback, but also the pathologising of vengeful desire. By depicting the disorderly and chaotic consequences of revenge, and appealing to our common-sense assumptions that revenge is so irrational, emotional, and subjective that it must be excluded from law and justice, *Revenge* presents the dominant construction of law that privileges rationality and order. Because the act of revenge is shown to be intensely personal and heart-wrenchingly emotional with inescapable destructive consequences, the text elicits popular adherence to a form of law that cannot allow vengeance. At

⁷⁷Jaffe (2011).

⁷⁸Posner (1988), p 39.

once, the viewer is able to appreciate the immense power of the urge to retaliate, AND the equally substantial potential for revenge to provoke madness and disorder.

Revenge provides a powerful case illustration of the costs of vengeance – it makes explicit the cyclical nature of revenge with its illusion of closure and false belief that it will finally restore order and balance. The series shows that when vengeance is not curtailed, social order is disrupted, and that revenge can be endlessly repetitive. In this way, the series reflects an anxiety about how quickly a vendetta can spin out of control if the law is incapable of containing it.⁷⁹ It demonstrates that although vengeance is seen by law as unmeasured, unmitigated and simply rancorous passion, the instinct for payback is part of our nature. So while the law may well seek to ‘neutralize revenge by its repression’, seek to diminish its power, and in co-operation with popular cultural tales of vengeance, attempt to pathologise our natural desire for revenge, it can never truly abolish it ‘either as an emotion’⁸⁰ or as a possible response to significant trauma, loss and betrayal. But in the meantime ... it makes excellent television drama.

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⁷⁹Yoshino (2009), p 224.

⁸⁰Shklar (1990), p 94, quoted in Sarat (2005), p 279.

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